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ABSTRACT

All speakers bring to even simple verbal encounters complex presuppositions and expectations that may create discourse interference. A second-language encounter carries a complex and often inexplicable expectation load. Language expresses meaning and intentions, but also carries social import. The value or appropriateness of speaking itself varies interculturally and intraculturally when it is considered in combination with sex, age, or participant status. Styles of presentation, including speech style, use of phatic communion, overlapping and turn-taking, and nonverbal behavior, vary considerably within and among groups. Nonnative speakers who do not know the codes or rituals of a group, or who use them inappropriately, will be judged, consciously or unconsciously, as inefficient in the communicative task. Discourse interference can even be produced by aspects of the second-language learning process, including instructor attitudes, the availability of appropriate social and functional models, and structural forms. The type of second language, its formality, elaborateness, registers, code systems, and the interest with which it is presented will color the learner's perceptions, competence, and successful communication with native speakers. An instructor can and should create awareness of the variability of intercultural encounters and potential areas of misinterpretation. (MSE)

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Cross-Cultural Variability in Conversational Interactions

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Introduction

Whenever speakers with different native languages attempt a conversation, there are some inevitable and quite predictable areas of potential misinterpretation. Traditionally, these areas of interference have been analyzed as resulting from an insufficient understanding of syntactic, phonological, or semantic structures. It has only been recently that instructors and researchers in second language acquisition have looked to the area of socio-and psycholinguistics—and that these "cultural differences" have been more finely examined and, in some cases, recategorized entirely.

Indeed, a mere contrastive analysis on structural lines is insufficient to account for the potential for error in message comprehension. Conversation is a cooperative endeavour, subject to systematic constraints. Although suprasegmental and other surface features of speech are certainly crucial to the understanding of an interaction, comprehension also depends on the proper identification of interpretative frames and other verbal and non-verbal contextualization cues. For example, linguistic errors made by second language learners (e.g. tense) can sometimes be traced to the inability of maintaining topic-related continuity. Episodic and extralinguistic details are often distractions. In order to be competent communicators, both speakers and listeners must share a common framework at both a superficial and a deeper level for true communication to occur.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine some of the pertinent sociolinguistic research findings regarding the realm of conversational interaction or cross-cultural verbal discourse interface factors. Wherever possible, the variations of speech behaviour among L2 speakers will be

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related to problems in acquisition and/or communicative competence.

The notion of communicative competence involves both productive and receptive abilities to encode and decode meaning. Meaning is not fixed. It is a function of the dynamic patterns of utterances and responses as they occur in conversation. Speakers negotiate meaning, often with "scripts" or plans in mind, within an (assumedly shared) cultural framework. They use both verbal and non-verbal skills and strategies such as turn-taking techniques (rules governing the change of speakers); tying phenomena (how speakers establish semantic relations between utterances); asides and side sequences; ways of controlling and channeling the course of an utterance through interjections; and ways of opening and closing conversations (Gumperz, 1977). All these strategies are employed in particular contexts and with both receiver and producer making assumptions about roles, status, topic control and formality.

These strategies are, in short, very culture specific yet often unrecognized by the learner as being such. It is part of a teacher's responsibility to take this into consideration and to foster awareness of the strategies in use within the cultural framework of the language s/he is teaching. Even if the learner's ability to communicate appropriately is not significantly improved, at least the level of frustration may be decreased with the understanding (appreciation?) that possible cultural mismatches in the communication process can and do occur.

Presuppositions, Expectations, Predictions

All speakers bring a complex set of presuppositions and expectations to even the simplest of speech encounters. These are very likely to be unconscious, yet strongly influential on the success of the encounter. Indeed, what is often left *un*said may also be a crucial element of the interpretation. Note, for example, the expectation that the North American maxim "Be informative" will be followed. In Malagasy society, on the other hand, the expectation is that the individual will *not* be informative, depending on socially relevant features of the interactional setting. Obviously, if two such language groups were to meet, the listener's attitude as to the speaker's manner and character would be based on the judgments generated by such underlying values of information-sharing: Is he brusque or reserved? sneaky or careful? tight-lipped or discreet? Other similarly underlying expectations, and therefore interpretations, may hinge on perceptions of status, topic, turn-taking rules, rituals and codes. (These will be detailed later.) The point to be made here is that a second language encounter carries a complex and often inexplicable expectation load.

The Social Values of Language

Language obviously expresses meaning and intentions, but it also carries social import. The value of speaking itself varies interculturally and even intraculturally when co-varied with sex, age, or participant status. For example, in North America an older person is not generally expected to go through a long ritual when greeting or taking leave of a child. In Luo society, genealogical structure is created by means of a conversation among village elders. In other societies, silence itself may have more value than verbal interchange, (e.g. 17th century Quakers, or present day Cuna Indians of Panama).

Sex-determined roles may also affect language style and social value. In Malagasy, for example, men speak the "proper" or "ideal" code (very polite and formal), while women speak the "improper" or the norm. The interplay between these two types reflects the ideal and actual cultural ground rules for performance. Interestingly enough, although the speaking of women is formally devalued, it is nevertheless socially valued and a strategic social resource since women get away with direct, sometimes abusive, but honest social criticisms which keep group members in line (Keenan, 1974).

In English-speaking groups it's not so much a question of valued vs. devalued speech as determined by sex, but rather the lexical appropriacy of the language used by each, (e.g. a man doesn't usually say "What a darling suit!" nor a woman "Hiya, big guy, how the hell are ya?" — although times are changing). Linguistic models for non-native speakers are too complex to explain with any precise rules. The carefully neutral dialogues presented for second language pedagogy are often boring and uninformative to native and non-native speakers alike for this very reason. Included with appropriacy are such notions as forms of address. Again, these are very much dependent on class, sex, situation and setting as well as the personality of the participants themselves. Some societies incorporate these different forms of address within the structure of the language itself (Japanese and Korean), while others include them in the registers and formalized expressions used in address (in French, German, English). Sensitivities of proper formality are often violated in cross-cultural interactions.

Social class too will, of course, affect formality. There is, for example, a difference between the restricted communication code of the lower class which is used among a closely-knit group with shared assumptions, and the elaborated code of the middle-class which can be used to communicate information to strangers (Rosch, 1977). Dialect users follow a similar pattern, speaking the dialect within the community and the standard form with outsiders (Gumperz, 1970). In both cases, one lan-

guage system carries a preferred intimacy level and hence a decreased formality load.

Styles of Presentation

Styles of presentation vary considerably within and among groups. Participant cooperation often varies with the given-new contracts. Underlying assumptions which are not verified must then force either the speaker or the listener to reformulate or re-evaluate the message.

Uncertainty as to a newcomer's status is reflected by a native's use of certain speech styles. Consider the examples presented by Beck (1979) on the reactions of some middle class southerners in the U. S. (Atlanta, Georgia) to middle class foreign workers. Until the status was equalized (and deformalized) over time, the southerners adopted the role of an adult addressing a child with the concomitant implication of higher to lower status. "Interestingly, the foreigners observed in this study did not acquiesce. They did not respond with expected speech behaviour. Rather, they attempted to communicate with southerners as equal status peers.... In the process of speaking with one another for the first time, ...southerners and foreigners created social relationships where none previously existed" (Beck, 1979). (Many native speakers adopt the simplification strategy in grammatical as well as social forms.)

Another element of speech acts is the establishment and appropriate use of phatic communion between participants which seems to establish and consolidate their interpersonal relationship. This often occurs in rituals such as leave-taking ("Remember me to your mother."), and may co-vary with formality and register. Phatic communion seems to ease the transition to and from such use for fear of overstepping only dimly understood social boundaries. Or, of course, they might use them where restrictions of formality would normally not allow.

Differences in overlapping and turn-taking also occur. In many English-speaking groups there are clear verbal and non-verbal cues as to when a speaker may or may not be interrupted: i.e., by maintaining the floor with "un" or "um," for example, or by not returning the listener's polite gaze until ready to relinquish speaking. In Antigua, on the other hand, a "conversation" may consist of many voices speaking out at once, with the loudest holding the floor at any one moment and the others not waiting for, but fighting for, their turn (Reisman, 1974). Of course, what would seem to be oral bedlam and perhaps rudeness to the English speaker are merely normal conversational strategies for the Antiguan.

Non-verbal behaviour (kinesic interaction) plays a strong role in conversational management. Eye gazing shifts, body shifting at prosodic

junctions, changes in interpersonal distance ("proxemic shifts"), all seem to accompany changes in topic, speaker, or the social relationship between the speakers. There is more proxemic stability in intraethnic encounters than in interethnic encounters, as evidenced by the number of false starts that occur between L1-2 speakers. It has been suggested that emic segmentation of interaction according to proxemic cues may be a human universal (Erickson, 1975).

Examples of unexplained discomfort on the part of one of the participants and hence inattention to the message, hesitations, or abrupt leave-taking may be explained as reactions to a distancing problem. Misinterpretations regarding intentions may spring from such non-verbal behaviour instead of simply from poor comprehension.

The closeness of Arabic speakers versus the usual distancing between English speakers in business negotiations, or the relative stillness of some Indian speakers compared to the more volatile movements accompanying the speech of some Romance language speakers are only two of many examples of such proxemic differences. Other more subtle gestures may include leaning back in a chair, sitting casually on a desk, or standing somewhat "at attention," all of which may signal formality boundaries, status assumptions, or shifting or terminating of topics or conversations. Appropriate verbal responses to these and other speech act elements are reliant on fairly firm notions of culturally-based procedures.

Codes and Rituals

Every language group has a system of codes and rituals which are well-known and easily recognizable (if not explicable) by speakers of that group. (Within any group of language users, of course, one could also subcategorize on the basis of class, sex, age, and so on.) Codes and rituals exist for such language functions as greetings, leave-taking, lecturing, story-telling, preaching, philosophizing, insulting, and joking.

A community's system of speech institutions and events constitutes the structured matrix within which speaking occurs in that community. Giving shape to these scenes as they are enacted, and underlying the dynamics of communicative activity within them, are sets of general cultural themes and social-interactional organizing principles, which may be seen from the point of view of the ethnography of speaking as the implicit or explicit ground rules for performance. Such ground rules are only analytically separable from the speech activities themselves (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974).

Even native speakers do not possess equal proficiency in the use of

these codes. Consider, for example, the difficulty some speakers have in finding the proper formulaic expressions to offer while attempting to politely but firmly take leave. (Of course, sometimes the difficulty is due to the other participant's lack of competence in responding to the signals.)

The effusiveness of greetings vary tremendously among speakers, the appropriacy determined by the closeness of the relationship (or temporary perceived closeness as in a political rally party), by the topic, the setting, and the age and sex of the participants. The L2 speaker will most likely maintain his own standards in such situations, or perhaps choose from his limited repertoire of learned formulaic expressions which may or may not be appropriate. This is especially true if the interaction is solely oral and there are no visual cues to aid in the selection of responses. Daniele Godard (1977), a French speaker, describes her own reactions ("irritated," "insulted," "amused") to phone calls in the United States. The ring of the telephone call is an instance of a summons-answer sequence, a conversational opening device "which, alone, suffices to establish and align the roles of speaker and hearer as a result of certain cultural assumptions." The rules for making a phone call in France include: 1) check number, 2) excuse yourself, 3) name yourself, 4) ask for your friend. The underlying premise in answering is based on following the format of an introduction, whereas in the U.S., the answer (if not the party requested) is treated merely as a conduit and often ignored. Godard concludes: "...it appears that the rules governing telephone calls cannot be understood unless they are placed within a larger system of interaction which distributes different roles to different means of communication with the other members of the community, a system which one expects to be itself determined by technical and geographical constraints on the one hand, and cultural values and attitudes on the other" (Godard, 1977:209-219).

No community or individual is limited to a single variety of code, but rather includes a range of elements such as linguistic repertoire, a code matrix (i.e., codes and subcodes, including language dialects and registers), code components (channel, setting, participants) which are factored into relevant features, variations in variable functions of speech, and the structure (phonological, syntactic, semantic) of linguistic variations within a community.

The systematic nature of codes is well-documented, especially in rites which maintain the social order. One interesting example where speakers maintain a structural competence in communicative behaviour which is not strictly linguistic is that of the Gbeya of West Africa. They have a definite structure for well-formed insults consisting of a personal chal-

league, a derogatory body-part comment, and à simile; the challenge may be at the beginning or end of an insult but not in both places (Shuy and Fasold, 1972).

A somewhat looser structural competence in communication is the knowledge which speakers have of well-formed narratives. Labov's work in New York with Black and Puerto Rican adolescents has shown definite structural components in story-telling, primarily aimed at priming, testing, and summarizing for the audience, and includes an evaluation of the narrative by the speaker himself (Shuy and Fasold, 1972).

In general, codes and rituals serve a more functional and social purpose than that of relaying new information. They are useful within society in that they help to integrate and maintain the speaker in the group. Non-native speakers who do not know the codes or use them inappropriately will—even unconsciously —be judged as inefficient in the communicative task. A person may have every intention of avoiding cultural bias, yet by subconsciously superimposing his own interpretation on the verbal performance, he may nevertheless bias his judgment of their personal ability, efficiencies, etc. (Gumperz, 1970).

Conclusion: Some Words On L2 Acquisition

One final aspect of oral discourse interference may relate to the type of L2 acquisition process itself. Impressions of the foreign language are often well ingrained by the manner of pedagogical presentation and/or natural acquisition. Other components include the attitude of the instructor and the availability of the appropriate social and functional models as well as structural forms. The type of L2, its formality, registers, elaborateness, code systems, and the interest with which all this is presented all serve to colour the learner's perceptions, such that his competence will echo these nuances and affect his successful communicative interaction with native speakers.

Second language learners can benefit from a type of contrastive discourse analysis to become aware of cross-cultural differences and similarities in the ritual strategies of speech acts. Acquiring a repertoire of such semantic strategies will decrease their distractibility to their listeners and help focus attention on their message rather than on how poorly (structurally) or inappropriately (functionally) it may have been delivered. The psycholinguistic ability involved in using linguistic choices to signal social psychological information is (shown to be) teachable in an instructional context, and is measurable (Jakobovits, 1981).

An instructor cannot possibly teach *all* the varieties and social functions of a foreign language, but s/he *can* and should ensure a sense of the

rich variability and the potential areas of misinterpretation. Awareness, even more than correctness, will help the L2 learner to acquire a fuller repertoire and prepare him for conversational encounters.

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